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20 December 1986**Coherent Rationale Emerges****Reagan Iranian-Contra Deal Makes Sense**

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The more we hear about the Iranian-hostage-Contra deal, the better it sounds. This is a perfectly serious comment, not intended to be facetious or perverse. It assumes, of course, that what has been learned about the deal so far is true.

In terms of policy, whatever the flaws of execution, the steps attempted by the Administration appear to form a coherent, and ingenious, package. It was a series of maneuvers that, to have any chance of succeeding, had to be conducted in utmost secrecy, so the rationale for what was done has come out painfully and piecemeal. But on what has been revealed to date, it is persuasive.

In particular, what seemed at the outset to be the most harebrained part of the scheme—the dealings with Iran—make a fair amount of sense, at least as the details of it were given by former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane. According to his testimony, discussions were originally undertaken to establish contact with elements in Iran that were comparatively sane and non-aggressive—and occurred at their initiative.

"The element making the proposal from within Iran," McFarlane said, "high officials, made clear that for them to be able to sustain dialogue and over time exert any influence to change policy within Iran, they would need to strengthen themselves. And in their terms this would require them to reach out to elements within the military, the revolutionary guards, or both, and that the currency of that undertaking was arms...."

Assuming this testimony isn't perjured, it means that President Reagan's previous explanation of the matter was entirely accurate: That the Iran initiative was originally launched, not to trade arms for hostages with Khomeini, but to strengthen anti-Khomeini forces—or possible Khomeini successors—in Iran. The long-hoped-for release of hostages as part of a larger deal was the afterthought (as an alleged token of good faith), rather than the other way around.

Even in these terms, of course, there are any number of problems. One of the most obvious is whether the people

we were dealing with in Iran were the real McCoy, or whether they could deliver on anything they promised. And the provision of arms, however justified, is certainly open to question. The fact remains that, if we were authentically trying to connect up with anti-terrorist, fairly rational people in Iran, rather than Khomeini, that is a defensible position.

Of course, what's exercising everybody now is the diversion of some of the Iranian money to the Nicaraguan Contras. But in policy terms, this is the best part of the whole affair. The Contras need help to resist the communization of their homeland, and Congress—after dragging its feet—has agreed that they should have it. If the Administration was able to achieve this without using U.S. tax money, where's the harm in that?

Again, these comments assume the truth of what has been disclosed so far. According to the early statement of Atty. Gen. Edwin Meese and other advisers, the essence of the matter was use of third-party money and agents to get aid for the Contras: Iranian overpayments, perhaps some Saudi money, help from the Israelis, etc. Who suggested what to whom is at this point unclear, but the basic idea was to arrange assistance for the Nicaraguan rebels that didn't come from the U.S. Treasury.

From where I sit, this kind of policy initiative is not only defensible, but commendable. The alternative was to let the Contras be defeated by the Soviet clients in Managua—an outcome that even Congress has found unacceptable. It is noteworthy in this respect that the most vehement critics of the deal are the liberals who oppose assisting the Contras in any fashion whatsoever. It is the substance of the policy, rather than the procedural aspect, that is the object of their fury.

On both sides of these complex transactions, secrecy was obviously necessary to success. If the people in Iran were the real thing, publicity about their dealings with the likes of us would be—and possibly already has been—fatal. In like fashion, if overpayments from Iran were being diverted to the Contras, news of such diversion would not go down too readily in Iran—nor

would it help the Nicaraguan rebels. We may be certain the recent uproar has done immeasurable harm to friendly forces in both countries.

These considerations make it pretty clear why the operation was so tightly controlled in the White House, and why the Administration construed in such elastic terms the requirement that it advise the Congress in timely fashion. Congressional committee staffs leak like sieves on such matters, as do elements in the CIA and State Department. We have seen numerous examples of this in recent months—most notably in disclosures to Bob Woodward of the Washington Post (himself, it is worth recalling, a former Navy spook with good connections to the CIA).

A corollary reason for running the Iranian-Contra connection out of the National Security Council—which is now being so fiercely criticized—is that the web of interference that has been woven around covert activities makes it virtually impossible to get anything done by other methods. As noted here a couple of weeks ago ("Impotence Abroad: Unmaking U.S. Foreign Policy," HUMAN EVENTS, December 6), Congress has proved itself adept at obstructing policy in such matters, but incapable of putting a better policy in its place.

All of this addresses the substantive merits of what was being done, not the legal position of the various actors in the drama. If laws were violated—which we don't yet know—then whoever broke them must pay the price. But as a matter of policy, on what has been revealed to date, the various components of the Administration's strategy add up to a coherent whole. ■